Cabin fever?

Try snowshoes for a change

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Some people think Montana's mountains are dull in winter. But if you try on a pair of snowshoes, get off the beaten path, and pay some attention to animal tracks, some interesting experiences with wildlife may be waiting for you.

If you follow the trail of a coyote you may find, as I did one day, the place where he has killed and eaten a snowshoe rabbit. There were a few drops of blood on the snow and the rabbit's two hind feet—nothing else.

Apparently the coyote ate bones, guts, skin, and all—but those two big hind feet with their thick pads of hair were too much for him to stomach.

On another occasion I followed the trail of a snowshoe rabbit. I was only a few minutes behind him, for he had circled around and left fresh tracks on top of my own snowshoe trail. Finally I came to a place where the rabbit's tracks ended abruptly, as if the animal had disappeared into thin air.

On investigation it turned out that he really HAD disappeared into the air. There were a few tufts of rabbit fur on the snow, and the wing-marks of a large bird. Clearly a hawk had killed the rabbit and flown away with it when he heard me coming.

He must have had some trouble getting airborne with his burden, as there was an intermittant drag-mark in the snow extending for fifty feet or more.

One winter a few years ago there was a bunch of five big bull elk hanging around the ridge above my cabin. The snow was deep that year, and they would come out in the open meadows where they would paw through the snow to get at the grass.

Snowshoeing over a rise one day I saw this bunch some distance ahead of me; they took off running and scattered in different directions. One of them made the mistake of trying to cross a draw where the snow had accumulated to a considerable depth, and he was soon floundering shoulder-deep.

In the old days the Indians of the North Woods used to run down big game on snowshoes. Taking a hint from this, I set off after the elk as fast as I could go, just to see how close to him I could get. I had no trouble catching up with him, because after pushing across the draw he got into a thick stand of little lodgepoles, where his horns got badly tangled in the trees.

Half buried in the snow, he became so exhausted by his struggles that by the time I reached him he seemed to have given up and just lay there panting.

Riding up on the surface on my snowshoes I towered over the elk, but I squatted down next to him and began stroking his side. This seemed to calm him—or maybe he just got his wind back—in any case his breathing became quieter. After a while he heaved himself up out of the snow and shook his antlers loose from the trees. At this point I decided it was prudent to get well out of his way, so I did.